

Interviewing faculty on teaching excellence (Part 2)

This is the second issue of the series on teaching excellence, a compilation of the bright ideas of fourteen faculty members and two instructors from various departments as to how to teach effectively.

The ideas were collected through unstructured interviews in which the interviewees freely discussed their teaching experiences. The discussions were not confined to the particular topics which we used to organize and present the ideas in this series of *Teaching-Learning Tips*. To make the presentation more concise, not every interviewee is quoted on all topics.

Thanks are due to:

Dr. James Buchanan, Lecturer, *Division of Humanities*
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Dr. Ke-wan Wang, Lecturer, *Division of Humanities*
Dr. Dorothy Wong, Lecturer, *Department of Management*

for all the bright ideas.

In this issue, we have additional input from Dr. Avi Naiman of the Department of Computer Science, who kindly responded to our request for ideas and shared his bright ideas for stimulating interaction in class.

Thank you, Dr. Naiman!

Ways to stimulate interaction in class

Raising questions

Dr. Ke-wan Wang of the Division of Humanities raises simple but provocative questions to stimulate discussion in his contemporary Chinese history class. “Start with questions about which students have much to say, preferably questions that may draw on their personal experience,” suggested Dr. Wang.

This approach is strongly echoed by Ms. Winnie Or, Assistant Instructor of the Language Centre, who always tries her best to help students speak up in class. “Make the student feel he/she is an authority or expert able to provide needed information to others” is the suggestion from Ms. Or. A typical example of this approach is to ask students about their hall life at midnight. “Students will have a lot to tell and I shall listen attentively, clarify their points and throw in other questions.” The design of a lesson plan that focuses on current issues obviously helps.

Dr. Avi Naiman of the Department of Computer Science uses a *Random Student Generator* — a box with all of the students’ names in it. When he wants feedback in a lecture but no one responds, he picks a name out of the box and that person is required to respond to the question — although he tries to be sensitive to students who have a hard time answering the questions by helping them out. Then, that student inherits the box, and picks the next volunteer!

Inviting questions

“If a student has a question to ask, I will answer it even if a similar question has just been raised and fully answered,” said Dr. In-chi Hu, a statistician and Lecturer of the Department of Management. “I respond to their questions in their way of thinking and never impose on them a right answer. No questions are stupid in class.”

This attitude is shared by Dr. Samuel Chanson of the Department of Computer Science.

“I raise questions, invite questions and thank students for every question raised. I make myself approachable and never put my students down.”

As Dr. Avi Naiman from the Department of Computer Science put it, “Even when students are way off base in their responses, instead of denigrating them — which would discourage further interaction — I try to point out the positive aspects of their proposed solutions, and demonstrate the limitations in light of ‘an even-better approach’.”

Creating a climate which is conducive to interaction

Mr. Christopher Green, Senior Instructor of the Language Centre, stressed the importance of a caring attitude in stimulating students to speak up. “Creating and maintaining a climate in which students feel free to speak their minds is of paramount importance.”

To achieve this aim, Dr. Avi Naiman used an ice-breaking exercise in his computer graphics course. “In my first lecture, I had half of the students step into the hall for 3 minutes while the other half watched a videotape of a computer graphics animation. Then the two halves switched places and I showed a different animation. Then I had the students paired off (one from each half) and asked them to describe what they saw to each other. Finally, I showed both video segments again and had students discuss the problems they encountered both in describing what they saw and understanding what was described to them. This was fun as well as an *instructive ice breaker*, encouraging the students to form their own opinions, helping them appreciate the difficulty of describing visual images in words, and demonstrating that I expect full participation from them during classes.”

Dr. James Buchanan of the Division of Humanities uses a different approach to create an active learning climate. “I use examples to which I hope they can relate. I try to make them laugh as well as think. The key is to keep the climate active and alive. I challenge their presuppositions by presenting that which is

different, sometimes radically different and in this way help to open their minds and help them think critically about their own beliefs. What must be realized is that teaching is interactive and thus is partly the impartation of information and partly a performance.”

A lecturer in human resource management and organizational behaviour, Dr. Dorothy Wong of the Department of Management places much emphasis on creating a classroom culture that is interactive, participatory, and open with mutual trust and respect. Encouraging questions from students is one of the many ways to create that culture. Another way is to personalize interaction. During the question-answer process, Dr. Wong asks a student his name, addresses the student in her answer to “make it more personal”, and tries her best to remember the name. This practice is exercised in every possible interaction with students during the semester, and enables Dr. Wong to remember most faces and a substantial number of the names of 200 students by the end of a semester!

Dr. Avi Naiman has another way to personalize interaction with his students. “I take their pictures to learn their names; meet with them individually to get to know their interests and hobbies and concerns about the course; learn how to pronounce their names; solicit feedback on my teaching style; and administer an evaluation of the course in terms of its level of difficulty and workload.”

Both Prof. Roland Chin of the Department of Computer Science and Ms. Winnie Or of the Language Centre stressed that the attitude of the teacher is the most important factor in creating a participative learning climate. “Students can tell right away if you are genuinely interested in them and care about their learning,” Prof. Chin said.

Of course it takes time for teachers and students to establish a supportive and active learning climate. Dr. Dorothy Wong of the Department of Management said that this formation period normally takes at least four weeks in a new class, e.g. a first-year class in which the students are all strangers to each other.

Demonstrating a “we learn together” attitude

Dr. Aaron Buchwald, Lecturer of the Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, said that to help students master the approach to analyze a new circuit, he sometimes tries it himself in front of the class and thinks aloud. He might make mistakes in his analysis, which he honestly admits. “But students will learn that analysis takes time even with an experienced designer. Mistakes are chances to learn,” Dr. Buchwald stressed. This method helps students to build up the trust level in class and make them more willing to speak up without being afraid of “looking foolish”.

Sometimes, Dr. K.Y. Li of the Department of Mathematics purposely makes mistakes in a problem-solving process and asks for corrections from students. He always thinks aloud in class and demonstrates ways to solve a mathematical problem. Of course, he is more than happy if students can suggest other ways to tackle the problem.

Using common language

To Dr. James Buchanan, Lecturer in the Division of Humanities, the prerequisite for active interaction in class is language. “The challenge is to learn to express your ideas in a layman’s language. Also I keep reminding myself that the students probably do not share the same enthusiasm for the subject matter that I do so I have to try draw them into it slowly. Often students become enthusiastic because teacher is—enthusiasm is infectious. Using English, a second language, presents an added challenge in the attempt to communicate complicated ideas.” opined Dr. Buchanan.

This technique of using a language that students can understand is stressed by almost all interviewees, who are well aware of the language issue in Hong Kong.

Using jokes or humour

Prof. K. C. Smith of the Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Dr. Jimmy Fung of the Department of Mathematics, and Dr. Jogesh K. Muppala of the Department of Computer Science all

emphasized the use of jokes or humour in creating a lively learning atmosphere in class. However, to tell context-related jokes is not an easy task and demands very keen observational skills.

Diversification of teaching methods

Case study, classroom debate, small group discussion, group presentation, and individual exercise are some commonly quoted classroom activities other than lectures.

For example, at the beginning of each class, Dr. Avi Naiman of the Department of Computer Science shows a short segment of videotape on the lecture topic, and then has the students share their opinions and ask questions about what they saw, stimulating their interest in the subject and refining their ability to analyze others' work. "I am often quite pleasantly surprised by the perspectives they share," said Dr. Naiman.

Overhead transparencies are very commonly used to present lecture materials, supplemented with slides and videos, when appropriate. Some interviewees said they like to pose questions on the transparencies and encourage students to respond.

Providing immediate feedback to students

To provide immediate feedback to students and encourage them to continue educating themselves about a topic even after its completion in the classroom, Dr. Avi Naiman of the Department of Computer Science provides solutions to assignments and exams, and distributes them *immediately after the students have handed in* the assignment or finished the exam. Their natural interest in how well they have performed makes them read the solutions more thoroughly than when they might read the course materials! And this often generates further interaction as they try to understand the problems they encountered.

Building a personal relationship outside class

Dr. K. Y. Li of the Department of Mathematics remarked that an established friendship between the teacher and his students helps to stimulate interaction in class. Dr. Li usually goes to class a bit earlier and stays behind to entertain individual questions from students. He also approaches students deliberately during lunch time and his spare hours. He adopts an "open-door policy" that allows students drop in at any time. The e-mail is another medium through which he communicates with his students. "Teaching is not confined to the classroom" is Dr. Li's motto.

Last semester, Dr. K.Y. Li and some of his colleagues in the Department of Mathematics ran a pop-in tutorial centre in the evening, from 6.00 to 7.30 pm, using a classroom in the department, and the response was good. Students dropped in for all kinds of questions related to the study of mathematics and tutorial assistance was provided by faculty on duty. This semester, the group is thinking of giving tutorials by peers in a similar way.

Staying close to students and establishing friendships with them is exercised by most interviewees, although the size of a class, which may run to 120 or more students in the undergraduate courses, sometimes makes the practice fairly difficult.

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Next issue: Handling difficult situations, e.g. dealing with cheating and plagiarism, absence from class, chatting at the back of the class, etc. Do you have any bright ideas about these subjects to share with us? Please e-mail "etwinnie".

Teaching-Learning Tips is an ETC publication which aims to provide quick and practical ideas for lecturers and teaching assistants to enhance teaching effectiveness. It will be published four times annually. Contributions of ideas and suggestions of topics are heartily welcomed. Please contact Winnie Wong, editor at ext. 6809 or email "etwinnie".